A Memo in a Bunker, Intercepted Communications and Hamas's Oct. 7 Plans

A directive, which Israeli officials believe was written by Yahya Sinwar, the powerful leader of Hamas in Gaza, and recordings called for fighters to target soldiers and civilian communities — and to broadcast the violent acts.

Israeli soldiers checking bodies in Kfar Aza, a village near Gaza, on Oct. 10, 2023. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

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By Ronen Bergman and Adam Rasgon
Reporting from Tel Aviv

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After assassinating a top Hamas commander, Muhammed Sinwar, in May 2025, the Israeli military sent a special unit into an underground complex he had used. There, they found a computer unconnected to a network — and much harder to access by Israeli operations spying on Hamas communications.

The computer held an image of a six-page memo, handwritten in Arabic, that the Israeli intelligence community believes was by his brother Yahya Sinwar, who as the powerful leader of Hamas in Gaza helped plot the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel. Dated Aug. 24, 2022, it appears to be a directive from Mr. Sinwar with instructions for the assault, according to seven Israeli officials.

The memo, a copy of which was obtained by The New York Times, calls for fighters to target soldiers and civilian communities — as well as to broadcast the violent acts so as to evoke fear in Israelis and destabilize the country. Commanders then issued similar instructions on Oct. 7, according to hours of previously unreported communications between commanders and subordinates intercepted by Israel during the assault and shared with The Times.

The Israeli officials say the memo shows that Mr. Sinwar wanted his fighters to target civilians from the outset, contradicting what the group's leadership has publicly claimed.

Although the memo does not explicitly mention plans to kidnap or

kill civilians, it lays out orders for fighters to enter residential neighborhoods and set them on fire "with gasoline or diesel from a tanker."

Freed From Hamas, but Not Captivity
Oct. 6, 2025

"Two or three operations, in which an entire neighborhood, kibbutz, or something similar will be burned, must be prepared," the memo said.

In an echo to the memo, just before 10 a.m. on Oct. 7, a commander from a Gaza City battalion referred to as Abu Muhammed told subordinates: "Start setting homes on fire."

"Burn, burn," he said, according to the intercepts. "I want the whole kibbutz to be in flames."

"Set fire to anything," a commander in the northern Gaza city of Jabaliya referred to as Abu al-Abed said around the same time.

A house in Kfar Aza that was attacked on Oct. 7. Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

The memo and the intercepts broaden the understanding of Hamas's planning and execution of the Oct. 7 attack, much of which is based on other documents and recordings collected by Israel during the war. Israel and Hamas have now agreed to a cease-fire, with the militant group's future in Gaza uncertain.

Sima Ankona, who formerly served as a document examination expert in the Israeli police, said the handwriting in the memo matches other examples from Yahya Sinwar, who was killed by Israeli forces in October 2024. Ms. Ankona, at the request of The Times, compared the document with samples that Israeli authorities had collected, including those captured by the military in Gaza, a note Mr. Sinwar wrote to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2018, and his signature on a statement to the Israeli

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police in 1989. (He was convicted later that year of killing four Palestinians suspected of collaborating with Israel.)

The Times translated the memo. Several words and phrases in it appear in other Hamas documents previously reviewed by The Times.

Izzat al-Rishq, the Qatar-based director of Hamas's media office, did not respond to a list of detailed questions, including whether Hamas's leadership outside Gaza was aware of the memo and the orders that commanders gave militants on Oct. 7.

Yahya Sinwar in Gaza City in April 2023. He is thought to have had a central role in planning the Oct. 7, 2023, attack, and was killed about a year into the war that followed that attack. Samar Abu Elouf for The New York Times

Ibrahim Madhoun, a Palestinian analyst close to Hamas, cast doubt on the authenticity of the memo, asserting that most of the acts described in the document did not occur in the Oct. 7 assault, such as the burning of entire neighborhoods. (Many homes were set on fire in the course of the attacks.) He added that the memo did not represent the culture of Hamas's military wing.

The intercepts were collected on the day of the attack by 8200, the Israeli military's signals intelligence unit, according to three Israeli security officials, who shared them with The Times. The Times reviewed and translated hours of the intercepted recordings, which included communications in Arabic among commanders and eight groups of fighters.

The memo and the intercepts, said several Israeli officials, have been studied by Israel to deepen their understanding of Hamas's attack. The Gazit Institute, a think tank affiliated with the Israeli military intelligence directorate, prepared a confidential report on the materials, saying that the "Hamas leadership planned and carried out an attack that featured acts of 'extraordinary brutality.'"

"Its aim was to cause great turmoil in the country and the military," said the report, which was reviewed by The Times.

The Therapist Next Door

The security lapses revealed in the Oct. 7 attack, including Israel's failure to find such documents ahead of time and its disregard of other warnings, have prompted a broad examination by the Israeli intelligence community. The attack, the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust, shattered Israeli's sense of security.

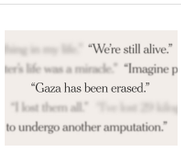
The Israeli officials all spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

During the Oct. 7 attack, Hamas and its allies killed some 1,200 people and abducted about 250 others to Gaza. Israel, in response, unleashed its full military might in a war that has killed tens of thousands of people in Gaza, displaced most of its residents, and reduced cities to rubble.

Hamas militants taking Yarden Bibas to Gaza after kidnapping him from his home in Nir Oz, a kibbutz in Israel near the Gaza border, on Oct. 7, 2023. Mr. Bibas was released in early 2025; his wife and two children died in captivity. Hatem Ali/Associated Press

Israel has been condemned internationally for its conduct in the war and faced accusations of war crimes from human rights groups. It has been accused by a United Nations commission of committing genocide, which the Israeli government has denied.

In May 2024, Karim Khan, the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor, accused Yahya Sinwar and two other senior Hamas officials of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including "extermination" and "murder." The crimes were committed as a part of "a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population of Israel by Hamas and other armed groups," Mr. Khan said when he announced the charges.



We Tried to Reach Gazans We Interviewed Over Two Years of War. Here's What Happened to Them.

Under international law, armies and armed groups must not deliberately target civilians or inflict disproportionate harm on

them to achieve military goals. In particular, killing and taking as hostages those who are uninvolved in hostilities are serious violations of the Geneva Conventions.

The handwritten memo and intercepts offer a more granular look at the group's thinking and its actions in real time.

The memo outlined a plan for a surprise attack on Israel, calling for bulldozers to make openings in the fence separating Gaza and Israel, and multiple waves of attackers.

Palestinians breaking into the Israeli side of Israel-Gaza border fence after gunmen infiltrated areas of southern Israel during the Oct. 7 attack. Mohammed Fayq Abu Mostafa/Reuters

It expressed hope that the acts would have high shock value. "Stomp on the heads of soldiers," it said.

It listed "opening fire on soldiers at point-blank range, slaughtering some of them with knives, blowing up tanks."

Commanders echoed similar instructions on the day of the attack, according to the intercepts. "Slit their throats," a commander from a battalion in northern Gaza told his team. "Slit them as you are trained."

Roughly 300 soldiers were killed in the Oct. 7 attack, according to Israeli authorities.

The intercepts captured Hamas combatants broadly calling for violence and taking captives.

When a militant asked if he should confront people on the road, a commander from a Jabaliya battalion referred to as Abu Muath responded in the affirmative: "Kill everyone on the road," he said. "Kill everyone you encounter."

"Now we are at the beginning of the kibbutz," said one combatant. "We have wiped out those in it. There are settlers whom we killed."

"Guys, take a lot of hostages," said the commander, Abu Muath,

according to the intercepts. "Take a lot of hostages."

The group's actions, the memo said, should be broadcast to the Arab world to mobilize people outside Gaza to join the fight. The plan envisioned that Palestinians in the West Bank, Arabs in Israel and "our nation" — either a reference to Arabs or Muslims or both — would "respond positively to calls for them to join the revolution."

"It needs to be affirmed to the unit commanders to undertake these actions intentionally, film them and broadcast images of them as fast as possible," the memo said.

Hamas militants during a hostage release in Khan Younis, Gaza, in February. Saher Alghorra for The New York Times

The minutes of Hamas's secret meetings in the run-up to the Oct. 7 attack also show how Mr. Sinwar was determined to persuade Hamas's allies, Iran and Hezbollah, to join in the assault, or commit to a broader fight with Israel.

In the Oct. 7 intercepts, Hamas commanders can be heard urging combatants to film their actions to likewise encourage others to join the fight. "Document the scenes of horror, now, and broadcast them on TV channels to the whole world," a commander from Gaza City called Abu al-Baraa told operatives in the area of Kibbutz Sa'ad. "Slaughter them. End the children of Israel."

Abu Muath, the commander, said, "It is essential that you bring the drone in so it films for the entire Islamic world."

Hamas officials also made public statements on the day of the attack, encouraging people outside Gaza to participate in the battle, though they ultimately failed to incite a popular uprising.

The Israeli military "won't be able to attend to confrontations on other fronts," Saleh al-Arouri, the deputy leader of Hamas's political office said in a recorded message broadcast on Al Jazeera on Oct 7. "After today, no one can hold back his rifle, bullet, pistol, knife, car, or Molotov cocktail." Israel assassinated Mr. al-Arouri in January 2024.

A child's bedroom at Kibbutz Be'eri, Israel, in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 attack. Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

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